

MAINE HEALTH ALERT NETWORK



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****ADVISORY-Important Information****

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TO: Public and Private Colleges, S.A.D., Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Childcare Providers, MEMA, Laboratories, Funeral Directors, PH-Optional, City Health Departments, LHO's, Hazmat Teams, Special Populations.

FROM: Dora Anne Mills, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Director

SUBJECT: Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault for the General Public

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Health Advisory on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault for the General Public

December, 2008

Driven by recent domestic violence-related homicides, the Maine CDC is issuing a public health advisory. Domestic violence and sexual assault are public health problems that are unacceptable in any form. All Mainers can play a role in preventing further violence, especially since important resources exist for everyone.

Domestic violence and sexual assault are sometimes referred to as “silent crimes” because victims are often too afraid to come forward, and bystanders hesitant to become involved. Domestic violence can take many different forms, including physical, sexual, economic, emotional, and psychological abuse, often forming a pattern of coercive and intimidating behaviors. Sexual violence can also take many forms and can include stranger, acquaintance, and intimate partner rape, incest, child sexual abuse, unwanted sexual contact, voyeurism, exposure, sexual harassment, ritualistic abuse, and sexual exploitation. While the victims of domestic violence and sexual assault are overwhelmingly women, the victims can also be men. Additionally, domestic violence and sexual assault can and does occur in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

Abuse and violence can affect the health of people at all ages and in a variety of ways. It is important that victims know that what they are going through is not their fault, that violence affects their health in many ways, and that help is available and healing is possible.

The Problem

The statistics on the impact of domestic violence and sexual assault are staggering and point clearly to the extent of this public health problem:

- Domestic violence-related homicides in Maine have risen from 8 in 2007 to 17 so far in 2008. 60% of Maine’s homicides are related to domestic violence.
- On average, every 1 ½ hours a domestic assault is reported to police departments in Maine.
- Nearly one in five of all adult Mainers report they have been the victim of rape or attempted rape during their lifetime.
- Two-thirds of women who have been physically abused by an intimate partner also have been sexually assaulted by that same partner.
(www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211678.pdf)
- In Maine, adult sexual assault survivors are more likely to report a diagnosis of depression (49% vs 18%), a diagnosis of anxiety disorder (38% vs 18%), and of drinking heavily in the past month (29% vs 4% among women) than those who do not report any sexual assault in their lifetime.

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- Every year over 7,000 Maine women are physically or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner, and over half of them (57%) are physically injured as a direct result of the violence.
- 1 in 20 new mothers in Maine report experiencing physical abuse around the time of pregnancy.
- 70% of new mothers in Maine experiencing physical abuse around the time of pregnancy were not trying to get pregnant when they conceived, compared with 46% of non-abused women. National studies indicate that women in abusive relationships often have trouble negotiating birth control with the abusive partner, and sometimes the abusive partner is intentionally trying to get his partner pregnant as a way to force her to stay with him.
- Nearly one-third of new mothers in Maine experiencing abuse are diagnosed with post-partum depression, compared to 12% of women who were not victims of domestic violence.
- Children who witness violence in their homes are at increased risk for post traumatic stress syndrome and other toxic mental and physical problems, even when they themselves are not the direct victims of the violence.
- Lifetime experiences with domestic violence or sexual assault, including in early childhood, may have long-term consequences. These experiences have been linked to impaired brain development, violent behavior including suicide, drug and high-risk alcohol use, unintended pregnancy, poor birth outcomes, depression, smoking, and chronic diseases.
- In summary, domestic violence and sexual assault are serious and underlying causes of poor health for many people in Maine. Health care providers can play a vitally important role in identifying and responding to victims through routine screening and appropriate referral.

For data sources and more information see fact sheet "Data on Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault in Maine, September 2008" at:
http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/phdata/injury_violence/reports_interpersonal_violence.htm or
www.mainepublichealth.gov.

Recommendations

- Speak out against domestic violence and sexual assault by letting others know that: domestic violence and sexual assault are unhealthy and unsafe; these acts are not the victims' fault; violence can affect health in many ways; help is available to victims, bystanders, and perpetrators; and healing is possible.
- Become familiar with local domestic violence and sexual assault resources in your community.

- If you belong to a civic organization, invite speakers from your local domestic violence and sexual assault programs to educate your group on these issues.
- If you are an employer, implement a domestic violence workplace policy that supports victims.

Resources.

- Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. Statewide, local, tribal, and new American programs that can provide critical victim services as well as training and educational resources for all. Call 24 hour hotline at 1-866-834-4357 (1-866-834-HELP) (TTY 1-800-787-3224) or visit www.mcedv.org.
- Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault. Statewide and local programs that can provide critical victim services as well as training and educational resources for all. Call 24 hour hotline at 1-800-871-7741 (TTY 1-888-458-5599) or visit <http://www.mecasa.org/>.
- 211 Maine. Search or ask for “domestic violence” and/or “sexual assault” for statewide and local resources. Call 211 or visit <http://www.211maine.org>.
- US CDC. Violence Prevention Resource Page: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/dvp.htm>
- Family Violence Prevention Fund. National training and educational resources on domestic violence. <http://endabuse.org/>
- US Department of Justice Domestic Violence Resource Page: http://www.usdoj.gov/whatwedo/whatwedo_hdv.html
- Maine CDC. Visit www.mainepublichealth.gov if you are a health care provider for the health care provider version of this advisory and related recommendations and resources.
- Maine DHHS Hotlines, including the Elder Abuse and Child Abuse Reporting 24-hour Hotlines. <http://www.state.me.us/dhhs/hotlines.htm>